

ECAC OP-ED FOR PUBLICATION

In a gubernatorial election year, how do we know if Kentucky is on the right track? The best way to see what the future health of any state holds is to look at how it cares for its smallest residents – its babies. About 90 percent of a child’s critical brain development happens by age 5, making the connections that lay the foundation for a lifetime of learning. When babies receive good healthcare, positive early learning experiences and are part of strong families, they are more likely to succeed in grade school, high school and beyond. When they don’t, their future – and the future of the commonwealth– is much more uncertain.

In the last 25 years, Governors from both political parties have spearheaded progress for our youngest learners. With creation of preschool in the Kentucky Education Reform Act (Wallace Wilkinson, 1990), enactment of the KIDS NOW initiatives (Paul Patton, 2000), expansion of preschool (Ernie Fletcher, 2006) and creation of the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood (Steve Beshear, 2011) and further preschool expansion (2016), we have a lot to be proud of as a national leader in early education. It is imperative that future leaders continue to build on the successes of past administrations’ investments in early childhood.

Giving children a fair shot at success in school and beyond requires everyone’s involvement. The Governor’s Office of Early Childhood provides coordination, collaboration and innovative strategies, engaging state and local community leaders who work together with the resources and programs available, to give families and children access to quality services.

The legislature funded KIDS NOW by designating 25 percent of the Master Tobacco Settlement funds for initiatives focused on development of the whole child prenatally through kindergarten. These critical funds have helped assure healthy birth outcomes through programs like the Folic Acid campaign, HANDS home visiting, early childhood mental health services, and substance abuse and prevention programs, saving Kentucky taxpayers millions of dollars. Tobacco Settlement investments have also improved program quality by offering professional development and scholarships to prepare teachers to create high quality early learning environments. However, these tobacco dollars are declining. We must find the resources to continue programs like these that are working for our families.

Children who experience quality early learning programs are healthier, more self-sufficient and less likely to enter the criminal justice system over their lifetime. High quality settings should be the norm regardless of whether a family chooses to use

private child care or enrolls their child in Head Start or public preschool. Thanks to passage of House Bill 234 (2015), all early childhood programs receiving public funding must be rated on quality measures through the STARS for KIDS NOW system, so families can make informed decisions when choosing early learning settings.

Access to high quality child care doesn't just benefit families. According to an article in *Forbes* titled "This Is Why You Should Care About Child Care (Even If You Don't Have Kids)" by Anna Bahney, "access to the established child care market increases labor force participation, boosts local economies and helps support a stable workforce. Quality child care also helps to build a workforce of the future."

Simply put, quality child care keeps parents working and children learning while building our future workforce. In Kentucky, 63 percent of mothers of infants are in the labor force. A single working mom spends 34 percent of her income on child care. Child care subsidies for low-income families have not increased since 2000 despite rises in the cost of living, making it more difficult for providers to offer high quality care. With over 50 percent of Kentucky families living at or below the Federal Poverty Level, we need sustainable funding to provide them with essential services, including access to quality child care.

Investing in children's early years is also good for taxpayers with a \$7 return for each \$1 invested, a cost-effective approach to improving education, health and economic outcomes and reducing the need for costly special education and social programs later in life.

The most direct, cost efficient path to a stronger Kentucky future is building a competitive workforce and that begins with getting our children off to a good start. Let's continue to build on our past successes and invest new resources and funding in effective programs for our most vulnerable Kentuckians. Let your local legislators and state gubernatorial candidates know that you support investments in quality early care and education programs for our children and our future.